

June 17th 1978
DATA

Department of the Navy
Bureau of Naval Personnel
Washington, D.C. 20370

Sirs: Att: Capt. John G. Colgan

RE: MICHAEL L. LA PORTE (MIA)
DATA

Please find enclosed copy of your last correspondence to us regarding our nephew MICHAEL L. LA PORTE, missing in action since Sept. 6, 1967.

From your files on Michael, you will learn Michael lived with us but for a short time DATA

DT from time of his dear mother's death to when he joined the Navy Michael's mother was my (Willard) deceased sister.

Your letter of Nov. 10th 1977 stated you would keep us informed and still with hope we are writing again.

DATA

Thank you for your courtesy and attention well knowing there are hundreds of thousands writing as we.

Sincerely,

Willard K. Swanson

WILLARD K. SWANSON

MARGARET V. SWANSON

(Enc 1)

SOF VIETNAM

LAPORTE



TURNCOAT TALES

by Richard Becker

Was There a Phantom Blooper? And Who Were Salt & Pepper?

ALMOST immediately after they arrived in Vietnam, American servicemen began to hear the stories. They got their unit assignments, they got their area indoctrination briefings, they got their VD lectures, and — as soon as they hit the hooch for the first time — they got a frightening earful of stories about Americans fighting with the enemy. Added to the trauma of being a "fuckin' new guy" were comments like these from the veteran bush-beasts.

"Better get your shit together in a hurry, Newbie. The Phantom Blooper's been knockin' the piss outta our patrols."

"Don't shit yerself if you see a white dude and a spib dude shootin' at you in a fire fight, Boot. We got old Salt & Pepper workin' in our AO."

Incredulous questions led the FNG to learn he might actually encounter deserters on patrols; turncoat Americans who wanted to kill him. For the sake of his sanity, he concluded it was either all bullshit or he was fighting one crazy war. He was correct either way.

They were among the most persistent and pervasive rumors of the war in Vietnam. They concerned renegade Americans who had become elusive figures — phantoms of the jungle — seemingly able to slip in and out of sight at will. Regular reports from units operating in all of Vietnam's war zones said Americans fighting with VC or NVA units sniped at patrols, hijacked vehicles, made propaganda broadcasts over bullhorns, led full-blown assaults on allied positions and otherwise aided the enemy. Since few American soldiers could offer any proof to substantiate the rumors and jungle fire fights rarely provided a clear view of the enemy, there was a tendency among field commanders to categorize the rumors as "interesting but unlikely."

But were they rumors? Unfortunately, they were not.

Marine Force Recon teams in I Corps periodically reported spotting "Salt & Pepper" in the field. Photo: DOD



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When the story of a "white VC" first broke in the American press in the late 1960s, it was discounted. The very idea of American deserters fighting under the communist flag in Vietnam seemed incomprehensible. Many Americans — in and out of uniform — wrote it off as fantasy from bored journalists with a belly-full of *ba-muoi-ba* and a yen for sensational copy. When the war in Vietnam ended, so did the rumors of American turncoats in combat. And then Robert Garwood bobbed to the surface in early 1979 to rekindle the fire of indignation. His 14 years of captivity, which involved active collaboration with the enemy for which the U.S. Marine Corps court-martialed and convicted him, convinced many Vietnam veterans that they may not have been seeing phantoms in the jungle after all.

The Garwood affair caused a serious re-examination of the subject (See "Bobby Garwood: Traitor or Victim?" SOF, September 1979). Declassified documents from the Central Intelligence Agency and Defense Intelligence Agency obtained through the Freedom of Information Act confirmed that convicted collaborator Robert R. "Bobby" Garwood was not the only U.S. serviceman to actively collaborate with the communists during the Vietnam War. The rumors had some basis in fact. Other Americans took treachery much further and did turn weapons against their own countrymen.

The first reports seemed to surface from Marine patrols in I Corps which regularly indicated turncoats were in action beginning in 1967. Despite command efforts to put a lid on it and avoid sensational publicity, the word spread rapidly among the squads and platoons who were most likely to encounter American deserters turned communist fighters. It also spread south of the DMZ and rapidly became part of the lore that grew up around the war.

Reports declassified since the war indicate at least five Americans switched sides and actively worked with both Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units. Many of those reports contain eyewitness accounts from grunts in the field as well as sketches drawn by the men who claim to have seen or been fired on by American deserters. There are a few oddballs, but the reports and descriptions run curiously to type and deal with nicknames that are familiar to most veterans. The Pentagon refuses to match these with specific names, but they acknowledge the existence of such turncoats as "Salt & Pepper" and "Porkchop," — *noms de guerre* that were invented by U.S. troops after regular sightings.

Arguably the most infamous of the confirmed traitors was a tag-team labeled "Salt & Pepper." Marines and soldiers reported sighting them on sweeps near the DMZ or the Laotian border from 1967 to 1974. The pair became legend in the northern provinces and the subject of heated speculation concerning their origins. Naturally, the Marines claimed they must be a "couple of

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Becker is a two-tour veteran of Vietnam, where he earned four personal decorations and was wounded in action. He has been researching and writing on the turncoat issue since 1970, and currently resides in a Washington, D.C. suburb.

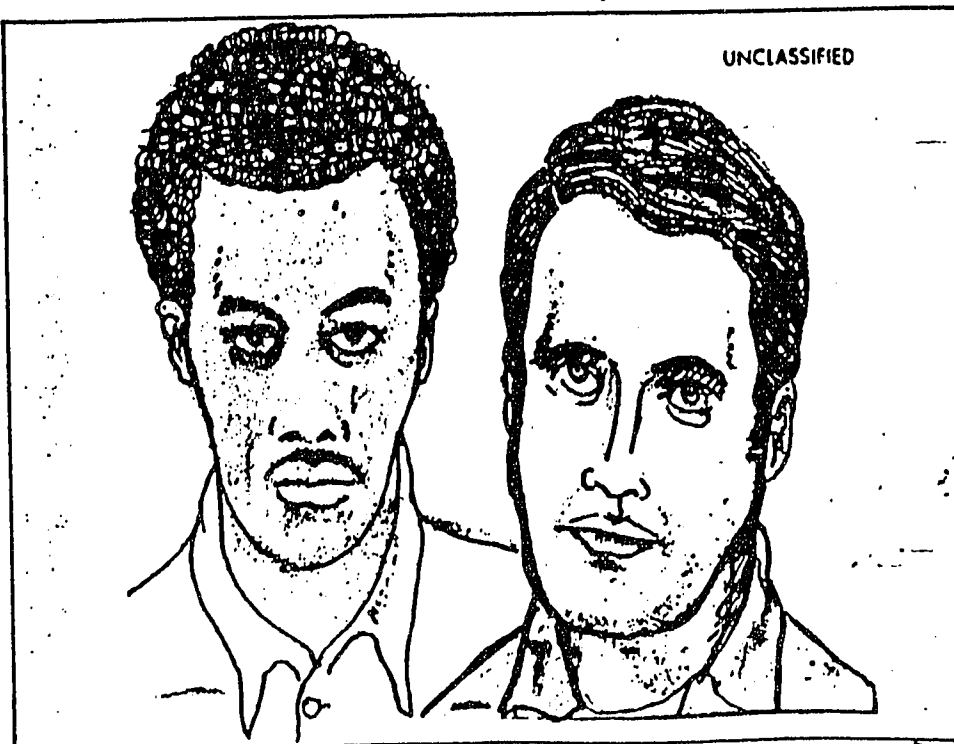
doggies" and the soldiers felt sure Salt & Pepper were "two jarheads that got fed up with the chickenshit."

Marine Force Recon Teams penetrating deep into uncontrolled territory reported seeing the pair on a number of occasions and described Salt & Pepper as "wearing NVA web-gear and carrying AKs." They were also frequently reported to be working with enemy units in the coastal lowlands of Quang Ngai Province where on several occasions they narrowly escaped pursuing U.S. and South Vietnamese troops.

Their escapades were communicated to disgruntled Americans at home through AP and UPI wire stories. The people in Vietnam even got to read about Salt & Pepper in the pages of *Pacific Stars & Stripes*. There is some difference between those reports and reality.

Intelligence summaries indicate that up until the summer of 1974, the men — always employed as a team — were primarily involved in non-battle situations such as preparation and dissemination of propaganda and procurement or transport of supplies for enemy units. In August of 1974, ARVN intelligence reported both men had participated in an attack on a government outpost east of Quang Ngai City. A Vietnamese after-action report, made available to U.S. officials, noted that the actual attack was under the control of "a Caucasian and a Negro American."

All that is known about the faces of the famous turncoat duo "Salt & Pepper" came to light in this declassified sketch from the DIA files. Photo: Defense Intelligence Agency



South of that area another defector, described as a burly six-footer with blond hair, was operating as a sort of VC logistics expert. The Americans knew him as "Porkchop" — a name derived from the bushy sideburns he wore to cover burn scars on his face. Porkchop worked almost exclusively in Binh Dinh Province.

U.S. Army investigators believe he was the most active and — judging from the allegations against him — probably the most successful of all the American defectors. Porkchop is credited with such incredible escapades as flagging down military vehicles and then hijacking them at gunpoint. In his most daring venture on behalf of the communist enemy he stole two U.S.-supplied M113 Armored Personnel Carriers from an ARVN armor pool by simply chaining one to the other and driving them out the compound gates.

Americans were always easily identified in Vietnam's sea of Asian faces but Salt & Pepper and Porkchop apparently traveled freely and entered major urban areas with no real trouble. Reliable American and Vietnamese sources report those three and several other deserters made their way into Danang for short R&Rs from field operations. Defense officials refuse to confirm such reports but they concede that American turncoats must have had assistance and protection from NLF infrastructures in major population centers.

Still, their behavior seemed carefree in areas like Danang which were crawling with ARVN and American military units. Two known turncoats were reported riding around the city during the 1970 Christmas season. Efforts by U.S. and Vietnamese Military Police to apprehend them failed.

And no one came close to capturing a turncoat demolitions man called "Tex," despite his bold incursions into allied areas. The traitor with a Texas accent liked to enter U.S. compounds and plant explosives. His name has been linked with reports of sabotage at a U.S. Marine Ammunition Supply Point outside Danang in 1969 although the official version of this devastating incident denies any such activity.

If approached by a sentry, Tex would launch into a carefully planned cover story and strike up a conversation with his unsuspecting countryman, putting him at ease with down-home patter. Then he was gone: only an explosion in a supply or munitions stockpile reminded the Americans that he had been there.

"Tex" was mostly reported active in the III and IV Corps areas. According to one source, he was wounded in a shoot-out near Bien Hoa in late 1969 and disappeared from sight. No further reports followed, and as far as is known, he was never apprehended.

Along with Pepper of the infamous duo in I Corps, another black — strangely, he did not acquire a nickname — was rumored to be active in a Central Highlands area close to the Cambodian border. Although accounts of his activities are contradictory, he is reported to have deserted from the 1st Cavalry Division. The story indicates he was wounded in a fire fight, captured by the NVA and nursed back to health. Following his recuperation he was persuaded to switch sides. U.S. intelligence agents later heard that he had married a Vietnamese woman and settled down to raise a family. Such reports were out of character with Vietnamese unwillingness to accept foreigners into their culture, but the rumors persisted.

And then there was the infamous "Phantom Blooper" of practically everywhere in Vietnam. This ghostly, unconfirmed figure was clearly the most well-known and frequently reported supposed turncoat of the entire war. He was seen everywhere from the DMZ down to the tip of the Delta. His nickname came from reports that he invariably carried an M79 grenade launcher (Blooper) which he reportedly used with great accuracy on American troops. One Marine veteran who first heard of the Phantom Blooper in late 1967 speculates that he was actually an NVA or VC who had become quite adept at handling a Blooper.

"In those days," he says, "we wouldn't have believed anyone but a well-trained and experienced American could be so accurate with a Blooper. That's likely why everyone speculated that he was an American deserter who took his favorite weapon with him."

The Phantom Blooper was reported to be most active in the AO known as the "Arizona Territory" to 5th Marines, many of whom believed the spectre may have been a former Marine. Although troopers reported the Phantom Blooper to be a Caucasian, he could easily have been a tall VC or NVA who had picked up an M79 from a dead American. In the battle for Hue during the Tet Offensive of 1968, Marines under fire from an M79 were able to kill an enemy they had tagged the Phantom Blooper only to discover he was an NVA with a captured M79.

Despite that, many Marine veterans are firmly convinced that the Phantom Blooper was a turncoat American and that he was none other than Garwood. That allegation, like so many others, was never brought out at Garwood's trial.



Robert R. Garwood disappeared from his unit in 1965 and resurfaced in 1979. Although he claimed to have been a POW, he was convicted of being a collaborator. Photo: USMC

An increased willingness to talk about the Vietnam War has not led the Department of Defense to share what it knows about American turncoats. Pentagon officials continue to be closemouthed on the subject of defectors and collaborators. That's likely why so many Americans were taken by surprise when Lieutenant General Eugene F. Tighe, former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, finally conceded in his June 1979 testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee that "there remains the possibility that a defector" — later identified as Army PFC McKinley Nolan of Washington, Texas — "may still be alive in Southeast Asia" (See "Alive in Cambodia? McKinley Nolan, Turncoat," SOF, February 1980).

Previously classified documents indicate that Nolan, while attached to Alpha Co., 216th Battalion, 1st Infantry Division, went over to the Viet Cong in November 1967 while stationed in the Saigon area. The circumstances relating to his defection were not provided, but he was reportedly accompanied by a common-law wife who is listed variously as "Vietnamese" or "Cambodian."

Nolan's activities with the VC were not as dramatic as those of other turncoats. He gave voluntary written and recorded propaganda statements which were used on leaflets and aired over Radio Hanoi and Liberation (VC) Radio. He is known to have lived in Tay Ninh Province for a time, and was also spotted in other areas close to the Cambodian border. During this period, a number of American and Vietnamese POWs locked up in camps near the border reported seeing Nolan but remembered that he kept his distance from the other POWs.

At some point Nolan became dissatisfied with the VC and decided to throw in with the Khmer Rouge battling in Cambodia. Exactly why he joined the Cambodian communists is unknown, but in November 1973 he was reported with KR forces occupying Mean Chey Village. Nolan is said to have had at least one close encounter with government troops that almost resulted in his capture by soldiers from the Cambodian 1st Shock Battalion in early 1974.

The last reliable sighting of Nolan — still in Cambodia — was in November 1974. A former intelligence officer who served in the border area said recently that the Khmer Rouge "planted Nolan beneath six feet of terra firma" once he had outlived his usefulness.

One of the more bizarre reported cases of defection to the enemy involved a young

Navy Hospital Corpsman named LaPorte. In 1968 he was assigned to a Marine Force Reconnaissance unit in I Corps. According to former team members, LaPorte changed sides following a covert parachute insertion into enemy territory.

Maneuvering to be the last man to jump, LaPorte reportedly steered his chute away from the DZ and landed in trees behind the unit. Once on the ground he immediately opened fire on his former buddies. The surprised Marines returned fire but were forced to withdraw and leave LaPorte when they were attacked by a large enemy force.

The Recon Team was extracted to tell their incredible story in a classified debriefing. Marine G-2 found the incident important enough to launch an investigation which revealed LaPorte had given considerable thought to defecting prior to the mission. He had given most of his personal effects to a hooch maid, saying he wouldn't be back and wouldn't need them any more.

LaPorte's ultimate fate is unknown. Shortly after his defection, he was reported to be traveling with a local enemy unit, but later dropped from sight. There is no record of his being encountered by Marine patrols

working that area. The Navy and Marine Corps, however, apparently still have LaPorte on their minds. His case file is "still open."

General Tighe's 1979 testimony noted that the reports of Vietnamese refugees have "alleged first-hand sighting knowledge" of Americans staying behind in southern Vietnam after the war. He went on to say that some of these refugee reports "allude to deserters." That was partially corroborated in mid-1983 when a Bangkok-based U.S. diplomat revealed to the media that some U.S. deserters and defectors were then living in North Vietnam and that the U.S. Army knew who they were.

Robert Garwood was clearly not the only defector during the Vietnam War, but the prominence of his case served to refocus public attention on a long-neglected aspect of the war. It also prompted a number of vets to come forward with tales of even

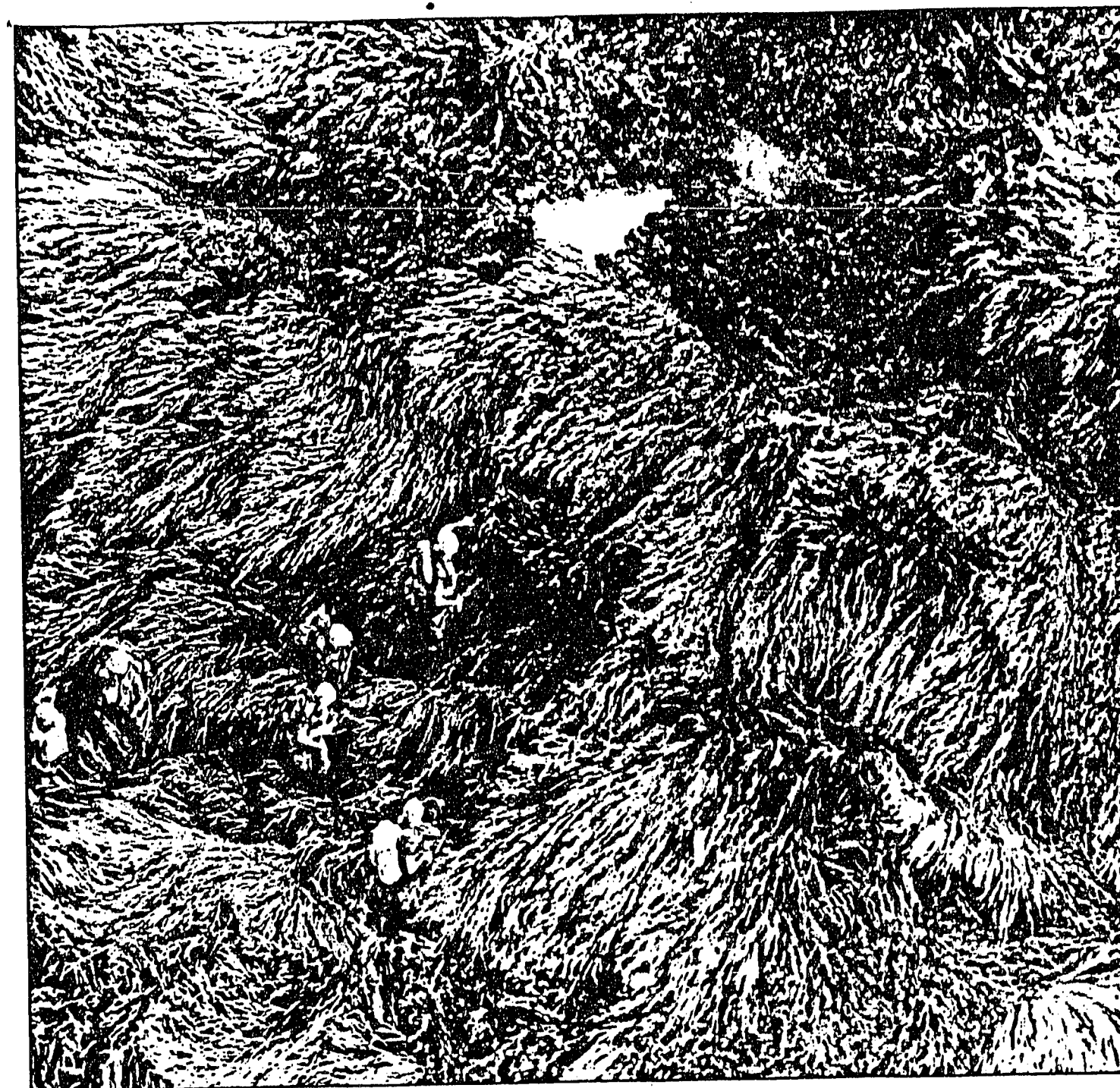
U.S. troops in Vietnam were accustomed to using M79s on the enemy, but when they got hit by them, the rumors flew. Tales of the "Phantom Bloopers" cropped up all over South Vietnam. Photo: DOD

more defectors.

In late 1979, a Vietnam Veteran, then still on active duty, told of a tall, freckle-faced Marine who he said was responsible for at least six American casualties in the Khe Sanh area during March 1971. This defector is said to have led RPG teams from the NVA 17th Regiment against U.S. armor supporting Lam Son 719, the ARVN incursion into Laos. A second source has since corroborated this tale and said that this deserter was later killed in a clash with troops from the Hac Bao (Black Panther) Company of the ARVN 1st Infantry Division.

Another veteran who served in the II Corps area told of a black traitor in the Central Highlands who worked with the communists. He went the whole route — wearing black pajamas, carrying weapons and traveling with bodyguards. He reportedly helped in offensive operations, wrote leaflets and made broadcast appeals to other GIs.

Not all defectors and deserters in Vietnam stayed in the countryside or became involved in combat operations. It was common knowledge among in-country GIs that a number of deserters were hiding out in the



Saigon/Cholon area as well as in a few of the other larger cities. Many dabbled in the drug trade and — to a lesser extent — the arms trade. They got away with such activities with the assistance of ARVN police, who conveniently looked the other way for a share of the take. A few of these individuals were apprehended by Military Police, but most managed to maintain a comfortable lifestyle by manipulating the black market.

Unofficial estimates place their number at between 150 and 200. None are officially known to have turned themselves in during the evacuation of Saigon in April 1975. State Department officials privately concede, however, that some may have managed to slip aboard evacuation aircraft during the chaos and confusion of the last days and returned to the United States. Military people in this category — DOD officials refuse to identify any of them — are still considered to be deserters rather than defectors or cross-overs. It's likely some of them worked with or for the communists as a matter of expediency and survival in an alien environment.

It was all very low-key, but the American military did not sit idly by and ignore reports of active collaborators during the war. In 1971-72, a small U.S. Army Military Intelligence detachment was based at Danang with the specific mission of tracking down

Dense vegetation made visual contact with the enemy an uncommon occurrence. Imagine a soldier's surprise when he saw another American firing at him. Photo: DOD

and either capturing or eliminating "Salt & Pepper." The team had a chopper at its disposal around the clock and was backed up by ground support vehicles enabling them to move quickly when sightings were reported. On several occasions, according to a wire service story, both defectors were almost apprehended. In one instance, they had been reported dead and villagers pointed out a grave which allegedly contained the body of a "white VC." The remains were exhumed and sent to a lab for study by forensic experts who determined them to be those of an Asian male.

All speculation became rhetorical following the January 1973 ceasefire and the subsequent withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam. Reports of American defectors and turncoats were passed to the Joint Casualty Resolution Center (JCRC) in Thailand, which also headed the search for Americans listed as POW/MIA. The JCRC was later moved to Hawaii, where it is presently functioning.

Attention was refocused on Vietnam War defectors again recently through the much-

publicized revelations of a veteran identified in wire stories in early 1984 only as "Marvin." According to reporters, Marvin told them one of his duties as a member of an "assassination team" in Vietnam was to track down and kill American defectors and turncoat collaborators. There are a number of inconsistencies in Marvin's story, however, and many Viet Vets are reluctant to accept his tale.

There are some interesting, perhaps explanatory, parallels between the course of the Vietnam War and the proliferation of deserter-turncoat stories. During the early years of the war, U.S. soldiers went to Vietnam with a sense of purpose and motivation. Even if a GI thought he saw a white man shooting at U.S. troops he only whispered about it. As the war effort became bogged down and public support deteriorated, the rumor-mill moved into high gear and it was easier to accept that Americans may have defected to actively fight against "an unjust U.S. involvement in Vietnam."

We may never know whether or not many of the rumored traitors were real or just colorful images conjured up by young men thrown into a war they couldn't understand. Whatever the truth is, no one who fought the shadowy war in Vietnam will deny there were phantoms in the jungle. ✕